THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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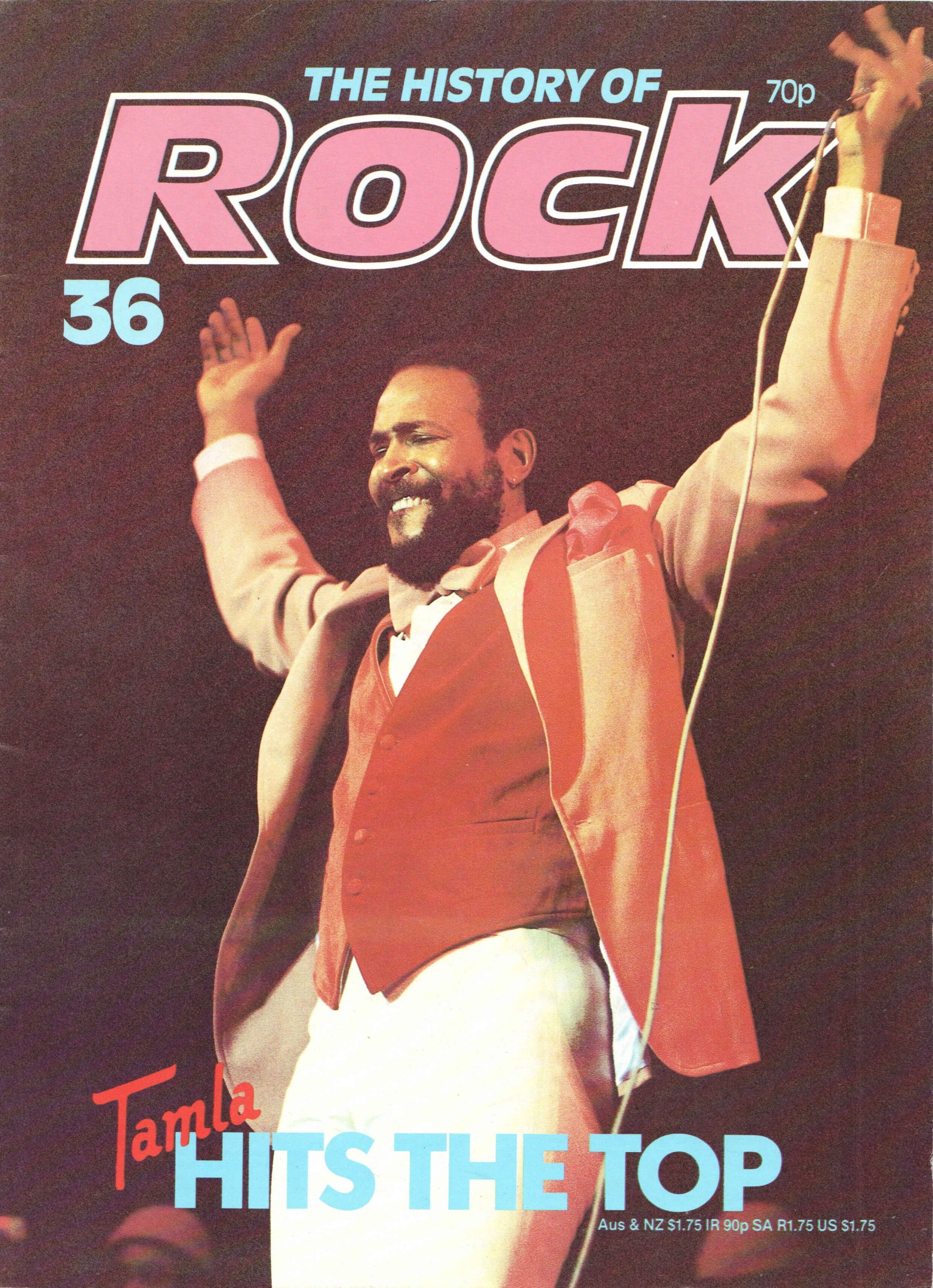

Tamla HITS THE TOP

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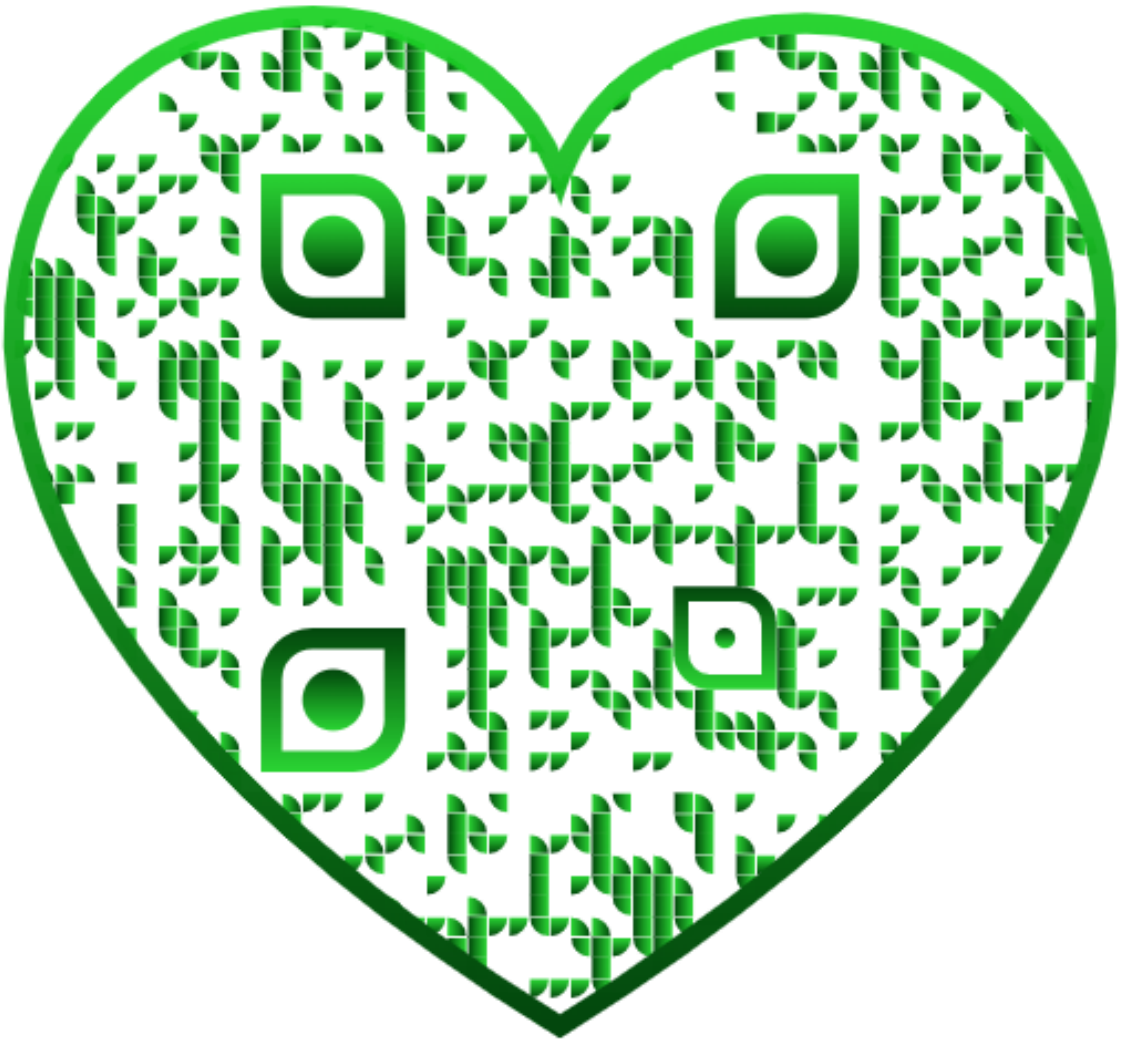

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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The explosion of beat and R&B groups in 1964 seemed to have swamped the stars of an earlier era, but the mid Sixties did have some important solo singers. There were talented all-round artists like Gene Pitney, great singers like Dusty Springfield, and also more outrageous stylists, including sex-symbol Tom Jones and the astonishing P.J. Proby, the man whose trouser splitting shocked a nation but who had the powerhouse voice of a great rocker.

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Tamla Hits the Top

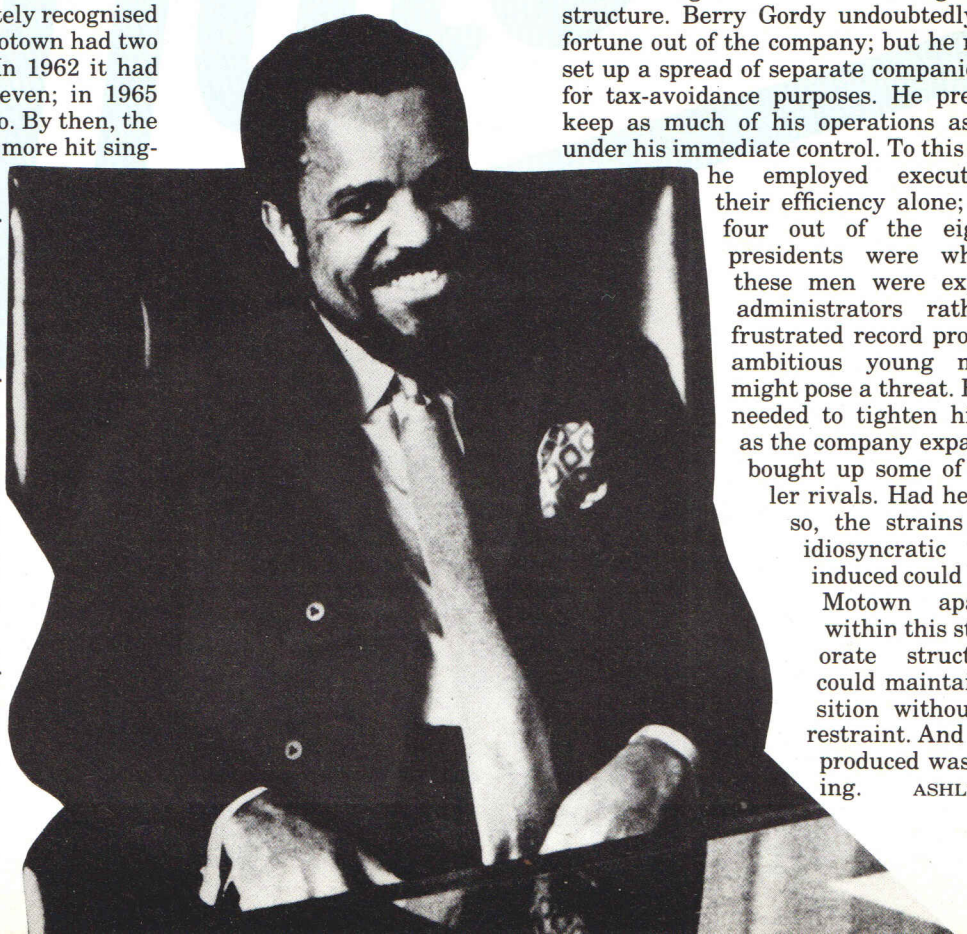
The irresistible rise of a black music company

BERRY GORDY had built Motown into a successful independent record label by 1962. But it was just one independent among others; one more record company that could prosper or go to the wall. The really spectacular rise of Motown came later in the Sixties when it flashed into the big league, outdistancing its small-time competitors and proving it could match the long-term financial success of the major corporations. That a black-owned business, promoting almost exclusively black acts, should achieve gross sales of 4.5 million dollars in 1963, a few years after Sun Records boss Sam Phillips had decided that black artists could never make it in the big league, was impressive. But it was astonishing that in 1977, the year that Phillips' 'white boy who sounded black' – Elvis Presley – died, Motown's gross earnings should total 61.4 million dollars. How did an ex-Ford production-line worker achieve this?

Quite simply, Berry Gordy had a strategy, a theory, of how to run a record company, and he imposed this on as talented a group of singers, musicians, producers and writers as has ever worked together in popular music. In the pursuit of this strategy, some careers were hamstrung or broken, some individuals ruthlessly ground down. Gordy often comes across as an ogre – seemingly megalomaniac in his obsessions and distasteful as a person. But for at least the 10 years from 1962, there was no doubting the quality of the music that came out – and this fact was immediately recognised in the market-place. In 1961, Motown had two Top Twenty hits in the USA. In 1962 it had six; in 1963 seven; in 1964 eleven; in 1965 nineteen and in 1966 twenty two. By then, the company was releasing, yearly, more hit singles than any other company.

Gordy's first rule was musical consistency, the application of what he called 'quality control'. Motown output was rigorously vetted, and the man who ran the company had complete faith in his own judgement. Other companies released a scatter of singles, hoping some would succeed, but Gordy only released records he was *sure* could make it. From 1960 to 1970, only 535 singles were put out – but 357, a proportion of over two-thirds, were hits. No other company could approach this percentage of chart successes.

On one level, this quality control involved the rejection of product that Gordy did not like; and the proportion of rejected tracks was high. At one meeting 68 recordings were discussed, but only one was accepted. And Gordy did not change his methods as the company became more successful; he kept the new talent acquired on as tight a rein as he could, encouraging what often became cut-throat competition between artists, producers and songwriters to come up with one of the few tracks chosen for release. Sometimes three or four producers would be given the same song and be told to turn out the 'best' version.



Below: Berry Gordy Jnr, the former Ford chrome trimmer who brought the production line into music-making. The formula worked; by 1966, his Motown label was producing more hit singles per year than any other company.

Servants of the company

This atmosphere of competition and rivalry could easily turn to jealousy and infighting. But Gordy maintained a unified company through his determination to mould everyone to the corporate identity. Sometimes this took on a ludicrous aspect – the 'company song' which he insisted be sung before meetings, or official melon-eating contests, for example – but a combination of incentives and fear encouraged loyalty. The Motown 'house band' who played on the backing tracks were always well paid, and had to sign exclusive contracts to Motown. And gifts would be handed out for services rendered – Earl Van Dyke, who managed a Supremes tour, was given a 10,000-dollar bonus afterwards. Many individuals found this paternal system crushing, but Gordy had no qualms; for him, Tamla came first.

The final element of the Motown strategy was the tight financial and organisational structure. Berry Gordy undoubtedly made a fortune out of the company; but he refused to set up a spread of separate companies merely for tax-avoidance purposes. He preferred to keep as much of his operations as possible under his immediate control. To this end, also, he employed executives for their efficiency alone; by 1970, four out of the eight vice-presidents were white, and these men were experienced administrators rather than frustrated record producers or ambitious young men who might pose a threat. For Gordy needed to tighten his control as the company expanded and bought up some of its smaller rivals. Had he not done so, the strains that his idiosyncratic methods induced could have torn Motown apart. But within this strict corporate structure, he could maintain his position without fear of restraint. And the music produced was astounding.

ASHLEY BROWN

What's Going On?

Marvin Gaye: from pop star to black progressive

In 1980, Marvin Gaye arrived in London – on the run from bankruptcy, two broken marriages and the Motown organisation of which he had been such a central part for 20 years. The impasse which Gaye appeared to have reached in his life was evident from the concerts he performed at that time. For the most part they were the performances of a distracted and troubled man, with Gaye playing the part of a stage lothario almost to the lengths of self-parody, fumbling the lyrics to his songs and threatening, it was said, to fire his band before, during and after almost every show. And yet there was still evidence of Gaye's consummate prowess as a singer, the relaxed sensuality of his performance, and an almost palpable air of penitence and sorrow beneath the braggadocio. It was as if Gaye himself was aware that all this was a charade of no great importance, merely a temporary respite from the deep but unspecified concerns which now dominated his life.

If the impression Gaye gave at this time was of an artist fettered by troubles of unfathomable complexity, the picture which had emerged in his early and formative years with Motown could not have been more different. The hits which took Marvin Gaye through the Sixties showed not a care in the world. He, after all, was the Crown Prince of Motown: suave, lean, cool and ineffably charming.

While Smokey Robinson's pliant, yielding soprano cast him as the hapless romantic in his songs, Gaye – with his light, airy yet discreetly arrogant delivery and wolfish smile – *broke hearts*, even when he sang of his own being broken.

Church echoes

Marvin Gaye was born in Washington on 2 April 1939, the son of a church minister. As a young boy he sang and played organ in the church choir, but he was, by his own admission, a difficult child 'with a natural aversion to authority and regimentation'. At the age of 16 he enlisted under age in the United States Air Force, believing that he would be drafted into the Special Air Services. Instead, Gaye found himself pumping fuel into aeroplanes, and subsequently waged a personal war of attrition against the airforce which resulted in him being discharged.

Returning to Washington, Gaye began to sing with various local groups. He joined Don Covay and Billy Stewart for personal appearances in a group called the Rainbows, and recorded briefly for the Okeh label with the Marquees, before being invited to join the Moonglows, a celebrated doo-wop group, then in a second incarnation under the direction of Harvey Fuqua. Gaye recorded with the Moonglows for Chess, but the re-formation was short-lived. When Fuqua moved to Detroit with his wife Gwendoline Gordy, Gaye came too, marrying Gwen's sister Anna. With the assistance of his old employers Leonard and Phil Chess, Fuqua set up Anna-Tri-Phi Records with his wife; one of the first releases on the label was a song called 'Money', written by Janie Bradford and Berry Gordy. Soon afterwards, the Anna label and Berry Gordy's Tamla affiliated, with Gaye joining Tamla as a solo singer.

At first, Gaye doubled with Tamla as a session drummer, playing on the early Miracles records and Stevie Wonder's 1963 hit 'Fingertips'. His first solo release on the label was 'Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide', a song written and produced by Berry Gordy and released in the US in May 1961. This was well before Motown records had gelled into a definable sound, and Gaye's earliest records intimated a sense of rugged spontaneity that was closer to his gospel roots than to the smooth soul for which he would later become renowned.

'Stubborn Kind of Fellow' and 'Hitch Hike', featuring vocal backing by the Vandellas – for whom Gaye was to co-write 'Dancing In The Street', their 1964 smash – gave the singer his first American hits in 1962 and 1963 respectively. His early style reached its apotheosis later in 1963 with 'Pride and Joy' and 'Can I Get A Witness' – the latter a roistering, uninhibited gospel work-out driven along by handclaps, tambourines, strident piano chords and a call-and-response choir. Motown would never get as close to church again, while the Rolling Stones' cover of the song on their first album brought Gaye to the notice of a wider, white audience.

Seven-day weeks

Gaye maintained a somewhat unusual position in Motown in these early years. He was a member of the Motortown Revue, touring by bus and working mostly halls and record-hops. The wage of 200 dollars for a 7-day week was well earned; when the Revue played a theatre like the Apollo in Harlem, up to six or seven shows were packed into a single day. As Gordy's brother-in-law, Gaye was assured of his position as a member of the Motown 'family', but – like all his fellow-acts – his career was shaped by the atmosphere of rivalry as well as support which dominated the company.

Berry Gordy's policy of 'selective marketing' – releasing only those records that were deemed chart certainties, and concentrating on breaking only two or three acts at a time – had producers and

Right: Marvin Gaye basks in the limelight at the Albert Hall in 1976. Far right: The singer early in his career. Insets, left to right: The women singers he worked with during his career – Florence Lyles, Kim Weston and Tammi Terrell.

writers vying with each other to work with the acts most favoured by Gordy. From 1964 onwards, the dominance of the Supremes and the Four Tops left the other artists anxiously awaiting the nod from the inner sanctum that could mean the difference between stardom and anonymity.

Gaye had a unique advantage, however; by his own admission 'a spoilt brat', he could use his family connections when he didn't get on with producers or writers – which was often. Gaye seemingly worked with almost every producer on the Motown books at one time or another, being teamed with Gordy himself, then William Stevenson, Holland, Dozier and Holland and then Smokey Robinson; the latter's soaring, deceptively easy melodies and sweetly-driving production were particularly suited to Gaye's eminently relaxed vocal style on the 1965 hits 'I'll Be Doggone' and 'Ain't That Peculiar'.

This may have been to Gaye's advantage; certainly, he never grew dependent on one producer, as happened to Martha and the Vandellas and the Four Tops, who suffered when Holland, Dozier and Holland left Motown. Instead, Gaye's talent was stretched and extended in various settings across the years, from the sly, jazz-influenced styling of Berry Gordy's 'Try It Baby' in 1964 to the dark, voodoo mystery of the million-selling 'I Heard It Through The Grapevine' in 1968 – a Number 1 on both sides of the Atlantic and showpiece for Norman Whitfield's startlingly melodramatic production. Although it had already been recorded by Gladys Knight and taken to the Number 2 position in the Hot Hundred, it is Gaye's version which is more often remembered.

Gaye's good looks and easy charm brought him a sizeable female audience

and led him to be paired over the years with a number of the label's girl singers. He first recorded with Mary Wells in 1964, then Kim Weston (with whom he made 'It Takes Two' – a particular dancefloor favourite in the UK), and in later years he would join forces with Diana Ross. But unquestionably the sweetest partnership of all was that of Gaye and Tammi Terrell. That began in 1967 with the delightful 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough', establishing a singular rapport between the two singers and the songs of a young husband-and-wife songwriting and production team, Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson.

Ashford and Simpson's songs were perfect romantic vignettes, constructed with Swiss-watch precision, and their productions on hits like 'Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing', 'If This World Were Mine' and 'You're All I Need To Get By' were absolute masterpieces – luscious, heartfelt and touching. Gaye's chart partnership with Terrell lasted on an off for the three years from 1967 to 1969 and it was as if it brought out in Gaye a heightening of the sensitivity in his performance. On record, at least, it was the perfect love affair, but its ending was to be desperately tragic. In 1969, Terrell collapsed on stage in Gaye's arms; after some months and innumerable operations she finally died in 1970 from complications resulting from a brain tumour.

Love on the rocks

Gaye was devastated. He ceased touring altogether and went into seclusion. Personally and professionally his life was drifting onto the rocks: his marriage to Anna was under strain, relations with Berry Gordy were wearing thin and record sales were tailing off perceptibly. It was clear that Gaye was no longer responding to the dictates of Motown's autocratic system.

But that, too, was undergoing profound change. Having experienced eight years of explosive growth, Motown were now subject to pressures from within and without. Many of the label's original hitmakers had fallen by the wayside or, realising the total control the label exercised over their careers, had moved elsewhere. The United States, too, was in turmoil, gripped by a popular feeling against the war in Vietnam, hung-over from student protest and inner-city riots which even Motown – decamping now to the safer climes of Los Angeles – could not afford to ignore.

In this period of uncertainty and flux, Gaye began working as writer, arranger and producer on a new project, a concept album that would capture the spirit of the age – anti-war, pro-ecology, a hymn to the unity of the people. Gaye saw it as the record that would establish him as a great artist, not simply a pawn of the Motown machine. The resulting album, *What's Going On,* was completed at the end of 1970. Berry Gordy and the other Motown executives listened to it in shocked disbelief. But Gaye prevailed: release it, or I go. Motown relented, and in the beginning of 1971 the record finally saw release.

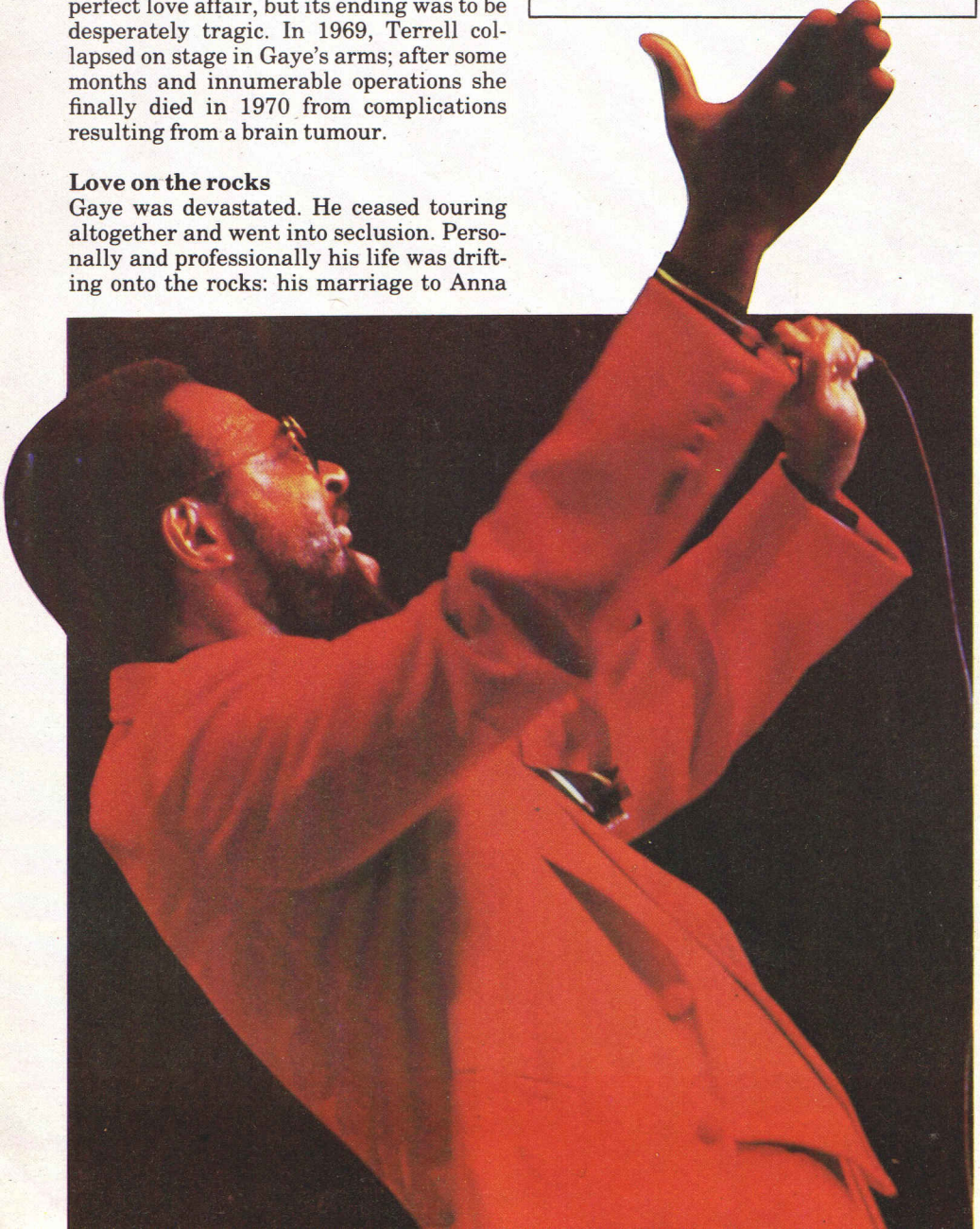
What's Going On was, on all fronts, the masterpiece Gaye had believed it to be. Musically, he had in one fell swoop taken black music into virgin terrain, building on the sweetness and drama of Motown's established production techniques with rich orchestrations and arrangements that brought a new depth and mystery to the music. The concerns of the songs catalysed the development of a social conscience in black music, which was to surface so visibly in the work of Curtis Mayfield, and the songs of Gamble and Huff. For Gaye himself, the brooding, meditative quality of *What's Going On,* the tone of plangent melancholia of his performance showed him to be a changed man.

Contrary to Motown's fears, *What's Going On* re-established Gaye in the charts with a vengeance. The album reached the US Top Ten and yielded three million-selling singles in the title track, 'Mercy, Mercy Me' and 'Inner City Blues'. For the first time, an artist had called Motown's bluff, and Gaye's success was to have widespread repercussions within the label – most notably with Stevie Wonder. The freedom thus achieved was to result in *Music Of My Mind* and subsequent musical landmarks from Wonder later in the decade. For Motown, it meant a belated recognition of the album market which had been opened up in the late Sixties by white rock performers and their record companies; thenceforth, albums would consist of more than two or three singles among filler material.

For Gaye himself, the pattern had been set for his future work. The film soundtrack *Trouble Man* was more successful than the movie for which it was written, while 1973's *Let's Get It On* was nothing less than an exercise in steamy eroticism. The singer co-wrote and produced every track to confirm a total all-round success. The album's intended sequel, *I Want You,* appeared in 1976; it was inevitably an anti-climax, and much of the material had been written by Leon Ware and other

Marvin Gaye
Recommended Listening

The Hits of Marvin Gaye (Tamla Motown STML 11201) (Includes: I Heard It Through The Grapevine, Abraham, Martin and John, What's Going On, Inner City Blues, How Sweet It Is, Mercy, Mercy Me, Too Busy Thinking About My Baby). *What's Going On* Tamla Motown STML 11190) (Includes: What's Happening Brother, What's Going On, Save The Children). *In Our Lifetime* (Motown STML 12149). *Let's Get It On* (Tamla Motown STMS 5034) (Please Don't Stay, Let's Get It On, If I Should Die Tonight, Keep Gettin' It On, Come Get To This, Distant Lover, You Sure Love To Ball, Just To Keep You Satisfied).



In the face of broken marriages and artistic battles with Motown in the Seventies, Gaye (left) became preoccupied with spiritual matters. Opposite: Gaye in the Eighties – sadder but wiser?

outside contributors. The social concerns which had so preoccupied Gaye in the early Seventies seemed to have blissfully evaporated.

Back to the stage

Gaye had returned to the concert stage after an absence of nearly six years in 1974, and his first appearance at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum was captured on the *Marvin Gaye Live* album. A further live set of more modern material, recorded at the London Palladium, surfaced in 1977, with one side of the double album occupied by the 10-minute plus 'Got To Give It Up'. A studio-recorded disco track built around a repetitive riff, it was a marked change of style for Gaye from his laid-back Seventies output thus far; released as a single, it reached the top of the US charts and made Number 7 in the UK at the height of the disco boom.

Other big hits had been lifted from the *Diana And Marvin* album of 1974 in 'You Are Everything' and 'Stop Look Listen (To Your Heart)'. Although they broke no new musical ground – both were easy-listening covers of Stylistics hits – they nevertheless found Marvin and Diana (Ross) in fine vocal form and were substantial UK successes at Numbers 5 and 25 respectively.

Marvin Gaye's records appeared to suggest a man who had slipped into a state of contented and constant exercise of his libido; but his personal and professional life was clearly in some disarray. The gaps between recordings grew longer, his stage appearances intermittent; he shaved his head, embraced overt spirituality and his marriage ended in a painful and public divorce. The record which chronicled this latter development with unflinching honesty was *Here, My Dear*. Released in 1978, it struck a remarkable balance between poignancy and bitterness, reflecting on the mixed blessings of marriage and bemoaning the iniquities of the alimony arrangements.

The singer's life appeared to be in a shambles. He remarried soon afterwards, but that, too, quickly ended in divorce; he received a demand for taxes close to two million dollars and declared bankruptcy. Gaye left Los Angeles and moved to Hawaii, and from there to London, where he attempted to stitch his life back together again with a round of live performances and the release, in 1981, of his first album in three years, *In Our Lifetime*.

For Gaye, the album was very much a compromise. He had planned an album which articulated his increasing obsession with spiritual matters – a record which would delineate the conflict between good and evil – a pronouncement for the Eighties as *What's Going On* had been for the Seventies. But once again, Motown intervened. What resulted was half the album Gaye had wanted to make, and half tracks which he had recorded earlier for an aborted project called *Love Man*. Gaye himself was disappointed with the album's content, and its sound, which he thought 'too Motown'.

Clearly, too, the conflicts over the record and long-standing financial problems had soured his relationship with Motown beyond repair. At the end of 1981 Gaye finally left the label after almost 21 years and entered negotiations with Columbia Records. It was the end of an era, but most certainly not the end of Marvin Gaye. One of the most outstanding and innovative talents in black music over the past 25 years, Gaye seems sure to delight and provoke audiences for years to come – no matter where his obsessions may take him.

MICK BROWN

MARY WELLS

Teenage chart-topper with Motown style

MARY WELLS helped create the history that surrounds the Motown sound. She was their third chart-topper and the first to achieve international acclaim. But despite these credentials ('The Beatles' favourite singer' was another), her success petered out within months of a Number 1 hit.

Born Mary Esther Wells on 13 May 1943 in Detroit, she attended Jefferson Junior High School and numbered Wilson Pickett among her circle of friends. During her teens she listened to Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke and the Chantels and became a featured soloist in Detroit's Northwestern High School Choir and the local church where her uncle was minister. She also wrote songs; one, 'Bye Bye Baby', she thought suitable for Jackie Wilson and, in 1960, she obtained an introduction to Motown chief Berry Gordy.

After hearing her sing, Gordy insisted that she record the tune herself. Overawed and completely inexperienced, Wells completed 22 takes before Gordy was satisfied. The result, though harsh and distinctly amateur, was full of feeling and it remains the singer's favourite performance. 'I was pretty hoarse,' she has since said, 'but it came out great 'cos it was more churchy and bluesy.'

'Bye Bye Baby' made the national charts, peaking at Number 45, and Wells was soon taking time off school to tour with the Motortown Revue. Her first album, titled after the hit, was a hastily-assembled 10-track affair full of Gordy songs previously popularised by Marv Johnson and Barrett Strong. Another Gordy composition, 'I Don't Want To Take A Chance', provided a second hit. Both of Mary's successes thus far had drawn from gospel music, but the inspiration was never to be so obvious again. In 1962, Gordy placed Wells with Smokey Robinson. This was a typical Gordy masterstroke, for Robinson wrote or co-composed no fewer than eight of the singer's next nine hits.

Ahead of the field

Robinson's hugely inventive playlets constituted the coolest contemporary black dance music of the era. There were, nevertheless, occasions on which these brilliant and beautifully-produced songs seemed no more than a crutch for Wells' slinky but often unprepossessing voice. Posterity does not embrace her entire legacy with total enthusiasm, and many of her records do not stand the test of time as well as those by Marvin Gaye or the Temptations – both acts that sang with a regard for their church roots and clearly broke sweat now and again. Perhaps less distinctive than either Martha Reeves or Diana Ross, Wells tried hard to separate herself from other Motown girls; she wore high-fashion gowns and deliberately dyed her bouffant-styled hair a bright yellow.

Wells' slightly rueful tone is heard at its best on a handful of top sellers, particularly 'You Beat Me To The Punch' and 'Two Lovers,' both Top Ten hits in 1962, the playful coda to her 1964 Number 1 hit 'My Guy' and its neglected flip, 'Oh Little Boy', a curious mixture of doo-wop and operatic wails. As soul singles, these were softer and less commanding than the classic Atlantic-Stax axis – but as pop records, they raised the temperature with a seductive beat and a warm, submissive sexiness. Until 1967, when the title was bestowed on Aretha Franklin, Mary was widely acknowledged as the Queen of Soul, her only rival being Stax's Carla Thomas.

The year 1964 looked entirely promising. A double-sided duet with Marvin Gaye made the US Top Twenty, while 'My Guy' went to the top in the US and reached Number 5 in the UK. Mary was voted Top Female Singer in the *Melody Maker* Readers' Poll and Top Female R&B Singer in a *Record Mirror* poll. She toured the UK with the Beatles, and was to record a neglected but worthwhile album of their compositions entitled *Love Songs To The Beatles* (1965).

Back home, however, there were problems. Her marriage to fellow Motown singer Herman Griffin crumbled and she

was caught up in a welter of bad publicity when Griffin, apparently seeking a reconciliation, quarrelled with local theatre manager Robert West and shot him in the head.

By the summer of 1963, there were whispers that Wells would leave Motown as soon as she reached the age of 21 and her Motown contract expired. Berry Gordy, allegedly 'surprised and hurt', fired off telegrams to a number of major companies advising them of Wells' contractual obligations. Despite this, she signed in late 1964 with the record division of 20th Century-Fox, whose lawyers pointed gleefully to the low royalty rate of 2.7 per cent that Motown had paid the singer.

Mary Wells has always rejected the suggestion that she was seduced by offers of an acting career. The absence of airplay was another matter; her manager, George Scheck claimed that disc jockeys had been warned of possible 'involvements' if they programmed material that Wells might release on other labels.

No Regrets?

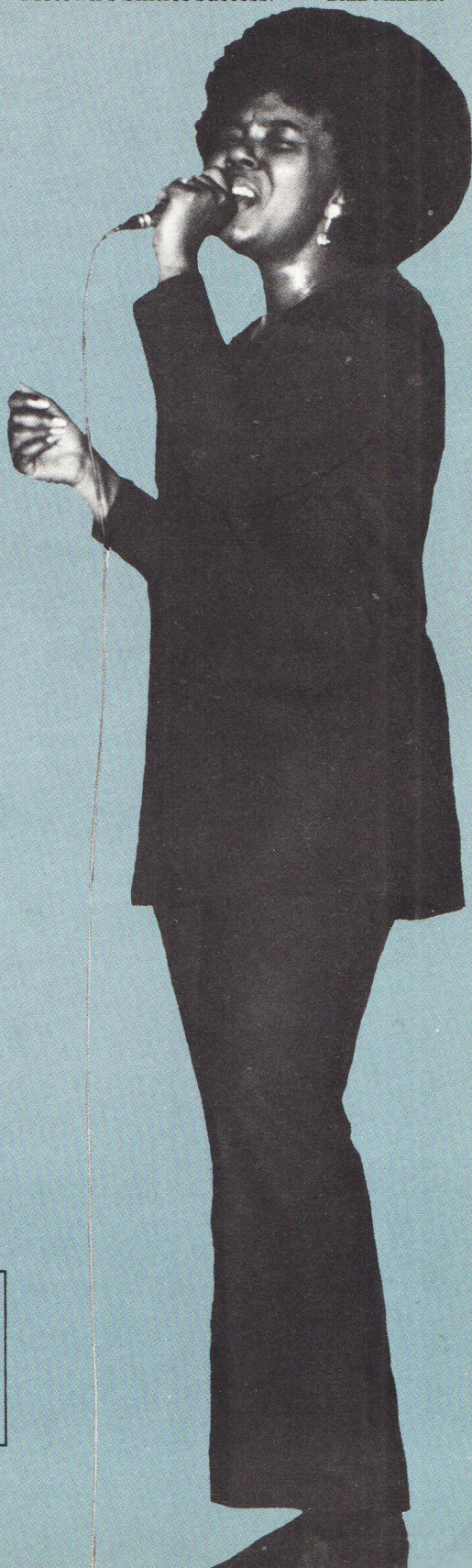
For many years, Mary denied having any regrets about leaving Motown, referring only to the difficulties in finding the right material and the fact that, compared to other companies, Motown wielded a lot of promotional clout. 'People always say "Leaving Motown was Mary Wells' biggest mistake",' she told *R&B World* in 1968. 'But I never did as well with Motown as I'm doing now. People say I disappeared but they're wrong.'

A cursory look at the charts, however, reveals that of her 13 Motown hits, 9 had reached the Top Thirty. 'Use Your Head' (Number 34 in 1965) was the most successful of Wells' post-Motown records and she never reached the Top Forty again (except in Britain where a reissue of 'My Guy' reached Number 14 in 1972). Her releases on 20th Century-Fox and Atco (an Atlantic subsidiary label) generally aped past glories in a superficially Motownish way. Drained of Smokey Robinson's influence, they are not easily remembered.

In 1967, Wells married Cecil Womack, singer and guitarist with the Valentinos whose 'It's All Over Now' was so successfully covered by the Rolling Stones. After the birth of their first child, she and Womack formed a publishing and production company. She signed with Jubilee Records and made a concerted effort to enter the night-club scene. Despite a number of gritty but minor R&B hits, including 'The Doctor' (1968) and 'Dig The Way I Feel' (1969), she and Womack separated in 1970 – they were divorced in 1977 – and singles recorded at Muscle Shoals during the early Seventies for Reprise were not so well received.

'I used to be very badly hurt by the oldie-but-goodie label,' she told *Rolling Stone* in 1981, 'but I'm glad now for those gigs because that's how I made a living when all those disco people were out there cleaning up.' Later the same year, Wells recorded a disco album, *In And Out Of Love*, for Epic; one track, 'Gigolo', met with some success but, overall, the new musical revolution did not inspire her. The early work of Mary Wells, however, retains its appeal; the songs she made famous at Motown have been the subject of periodic revivals – 'My Guy' by Sister Sledge in 1981 and 'Your Old Stand By' by Jean Tracy in 1982, for example – and have provided belated recognition for a singer who reflects the flipside of Motown's Sixties success.

BILL MILLAR



Far left: Mary Wells at the outset of her career. Left: The singer on stage. Right: In the twilight of her career, performing at Southend Airport in 1972.

Mary Wells
Recommended Listening

My Guy (Capitol Starline SRS 5040) (Includes: The One Who Really Loves You, You Beat Me To The Punch, Two Lovers, Your Old Stand By, What's Easy For Two Is So Hard For One, My Guy).

SAX 'N' SOUL

The tough rhythm and blues of Junior Walker

JUNIOR WALKER (christened Autry DeWalt) was born into a Baptist family in Blytheville, Arkansas, in 1938. In 1958 he moved north to Chicago, eventually settling in nearby South Bend, Indiana, where his interest in alto and tenor sax was stimulated by seeing a well-known local musician, George Mason. Soon Autry was investigating players like Gene Ammons, Louis Jordan, Earl Bostic and Illinois Jacquet. Above all he revered the ferocious bop of Charlie Parker and the gutbucket style of Nashville sessionman Homer 'Boots' Randolph. After he became proficient on a saxophone loaned to him by his uncle, his mother bought him an instrument of his own and his career was launched.

In 1953, while still at high school, he formed the Jumping Jacks with guitarist Willie Woods and adopted the stage name Junior Walker. (Apocryphal stories abound concerning this name – most of them from his own lips. Sometimes he attributes it to his boyhood habit of walking just about anywhere, no matter how far; sometimes he mentions a stepfather and shrugs.) With the inclusion of drummer Billy 'Sticks' Nix, they became the Sticks Nix Band and played dates in the locality, consolidating interest throughout the region.

By the late Fifties the group was based in Battle Creek, Michigan; Walker led a line-up that consisted of Woods, Ray Freeman (guitar), plus local acquisitions Jimmy Graves (guitar), Victor Thomas (organ) and Tony Washington (drums). Freeman and Graves were virtually interchangeable, floating members of a band that functioned mostly as a quartet. The group's ability to play almost anything on request rapidly earned them the name 'All Stars'.

Detroit connections

A chance meeting with fellow Southerner Johnny Bristol in a small club in Battle Creek resulted in Junior Walker and the All Stars backing Johnny and Jack Beavers in Detroit. Gwen Gordy (sister of Tamla boss Berry Gordy) spotted the duo and introduced them to her husband Harvey Fuqua, former bass singer with the Moonglows. He signed them to his Anna-Tri-Phi label where they promptly cut 'Do You See My Love'. (Curiously enough it provided Junior with a Number 32 Hot Hundred hit when his version was released years later in 1970!) Back in 1962, it was Johnny Bristol who persuaded Fuqua to produce Junior for his Harvey label. The first single, 'Twist Lackawanna', merely suggested that the All Stars were an ebullient dance combo, but the follow-up, 'Cleo's Mood', issued in February 1963, was a better indication of their quality. This piece of blues balladry allowed Junior to show his abrasive sax sound for the first time. By now Fuqua was well pleased with his acquisition and, after one more single, 'Good Rockin'', he sold up and took Junior with him to Motown late in 1963.

For nearly 12 months the All Stars honed their skills on the chitterling circuit, testing numbers like 'Monkey Jump' and 'Satan's Blues' before unleashing these two sides as their debut single on Motown's subsidiary Soul label. Their second release for Soul, the Junior Walker composition 'Shotgun', established them nationwide. In a matter of weeks this vicious jolt of R&B, featuring Junior's manic horn over slithery organ, blasted its way to Number 4 in the US charts in March 1965. Quite the equal of anything laid down by King Curtis or Booker T. and the MGs, it set the tone for Junior's best work over the next three years. With the smell of success in his nostrils he quickly issued another dance-crazed opus, 'Do The Boomerang', in May 1965 which scythed to Number 36 in the Hot Hundred.

Next came the moody 'Cleo's Back', a Willie Woods tune produced by Harvey Fuqua, coupled with the priceless 'Shake And Fingerpop'. The latter was a frenetic celebration of the barracuda dance, although according to Junior he had no particular dance in mind, only the mood of the moment. The next single, the infectious 'Road Runner', with its torrid flipside 'Shoot Your Shot', peaked at Number 20 nationally in 1966. For most afficionados it remains one of the Motown master sounds, an all-time floor filler with Junior sweating up a storm and squealing like a stuck pig. The redoubtable team of Holland-Dozier-Holland wrote and produced the song. In the UK it found favour as late as April 1969 when it made Number 12 in the charts.

Red-hot R&B continued to flow with 'Baby You Know It Ain't Right', 'How Sweet It Is', 'Money', 'Pucker Up Buttercup', 'Hip City' and 'Home Cookin''. The best sides, particularly 'How Sweet It Is' and 'Hip City', crackled with life and suggested that the All Stars were jamming at some riotous houseparty rather than in some dark studio corner. The same seeming spontaneity – no doubt the legacy of working so many clubs – informed the first three albums, *Shotgun* (1965), *Soul Session* and *Road Runner* (both 1966).

Unfortunately the ascendancy of uptown soul in the late Sixties forced Junior to dilute his style in order to survive. Once again Johnny Bristol, now a fully fledged writer and producer, was waiting to help him on his way. Strings, polite vocals and heavy choral support were the order of the day. Junior resisted recording 'What Does It Take' for nearly two years until Bristol finally persuaded him. Concealed on the *Home Cookin'* album of 1968, it found favour with disc jockeys and was released as a single. It made Number 4 and 13 in the US and UK pop charts in the following year, and the die was cast for future releases. Similar confections followed fast and included 'These Eyes', 'Gotta Hold On To This Feeling' and 'Take Me Girl I'm Ready'. Of the releases of the early Seventies, only 'Way Back Home' and perhaps 'Walk In The Night', which reached Number 16 in the UK in 1972, had merit.

'Way Back Home' was an outstanding tune originally written by Wilton Felder for the Crusaders with brilliantly evocative lyrics from Johnny Bristol and Gladys Knight. The song gave Junior his last indisputable classic.

Junior Walker had always sensed his limitations as a singer and after 'Groove Thang' in the summer of 1972, when his liaison with Briston ended, he returned instinctively, if briefly, to mainstream R&B. His own production, 'Gimme That Beat', released in January 1973, welded the hard-blowing sound of his heyday to the vocal raunch of James Brown. Sales were negligible but the record wasn't. The real problem was that Junior had become an anachronism in the supposedly sophisticated world of jazz-funk. A move to Los Angeles in 1976 and a change of label to Whitfield in 1979 made little difference.

Walker would never begrudge people their success, and about current trends he remains phlegmatic: 'It's the same thing. You sell a car, you sell a Ford, then change it to something else. The beat is just heavier. I been playing it all my life.' CLIVE ANDERSON

Junior Walker: a tough singer (left) and a raunchy saxophonist (right). Below: Junior with the All Stars.

Junior Walker
Recommended Listening

Junior Walker's Greatest Hits (Tamla Motown STML 11120) (Includes: Shotgun, How Sweet It Is, Road Runner, Hip City, Shoot Your Shot, Pucker Up Buttercup, What Does It Take, Shake And Fingerpop, Home Cookin').

The Four Tops' quarter-century of quality soul

'Standing In The Shadows Of Love', 'Reach Out I'll Be There', 'Baby I Need Your Loving' – like a sheaf of yellowing love letters, the greatest moments of the Four Tops' long career retain the ability to touch the emotions. Two decades after Motown's golden age, when the combination of writers-producers Holland, Dozier and Holland and the Four Tops produced music of energy and warmth, the group's recordings still offer an open invitation to the dance floor.

The fact that the Four Tops remain a chart act and a major force in music in the Eighties may be ascribed, in large part, to that rare virtue, loyalty. Unlike most of their contemporaries in the first great wave of Motown groups, the Tops' line-up has never changed. Similarly, there has been no star billing for lead vocalist Levi Stubbs, which might have presaged a solo career and a dilution of the group's hit formula. The Tops stand four-square, a team that stuck together. 'We still enjoy singing together,' said Levi Stubbs in 1982, 'but we're friends first.'

Gospel roots

Their apprenticeship began when, as the Four Aims, they made their stage debut in 1954 in the Detroit neighbourhood in which they were born and raised. Levi Stubbs, Abdul 'Duke' Fakir, Lawrence Payton and Renaldo 'Obie' Benson refined their performing technique through a mixture of graduation balls, garden parties, socials and talent contests before themselves graduating to the club circuit. The group made a healthy living by playing one-nighters from Canada to Las Vegas. Their developing style relied heavily on gospel: said Levi, 'We were raised in the church, that's all we ever knew.'

An important figure in the early days was Lawrence Payton's cousin, Billy Davis. Active in the Detroit music scene, he encouraged the group to go on the road and eventually helped them to a contract with Chess Records in 1956. The Four Aims – so-called because they were 'aiming for the top' – had by now become the Four Tops. Despite both this optimistic change of name and the Chess label's success with local blues artists, sales of the group's Chess release disappointed and they were not retained. Subsequent liaisons with the Red Top, Columbia and Riverside labels also proved fruitless, and it seemed that the group might never break out of the club circuit, on which they enjoyed continuing success.

At this point, Billy Davis again took a hand. As the pseudonymous Tyran Carlo, Davis had penned hits for the fast-rising Jackie Wilson whom Levi Stubbs had briefly partnered in the Royals some years before. Davis' co-writer, Berry Gordy, was in the process of expanding his small-scale Motown record company. After a word from Billy the group contacted Gordy, who signed them up. Their first (and tentative) recording, *Breaking Through*, appeared on Motown's Workshop label and was a jazz album in the vein of the Hi-Los. They were then brought down to earth by a year-long stint with Billy Eckstine's Revue: Gordy felt that there was still room for improvement. This experience provided the finishing touch to their stage education and was to place them well ahead of their less experienced label-mates, whose sudden success often found them unprepared for the glare of the spotlight.

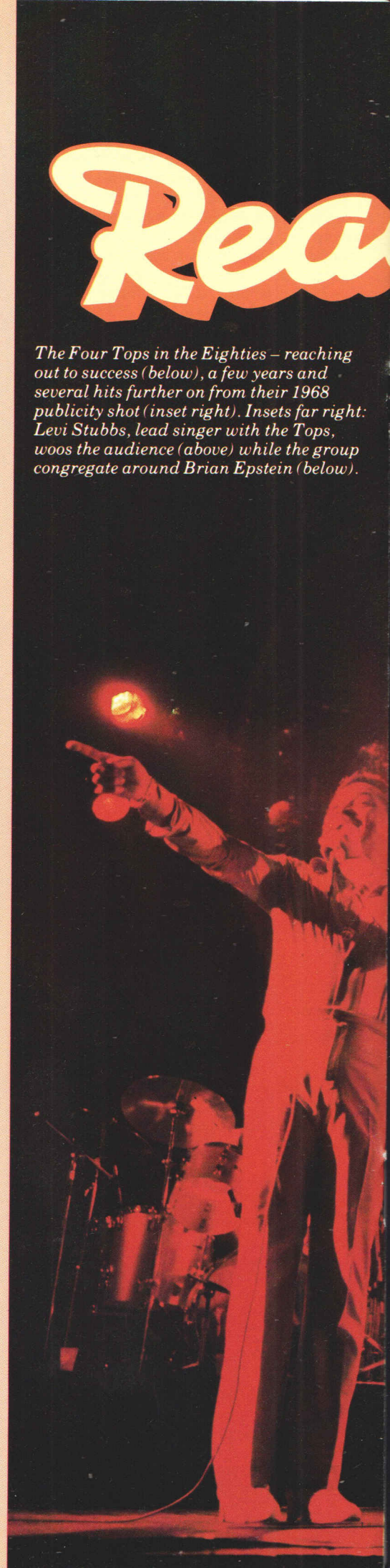
'The perfect marriage'

On their return from the road, the Tops were rushed into the studio – not as star performers, but as backing vocalists for Motown's first hit recordings. As Lawrence Payton commented: 'For a couple of years, we sang on practically every Motown record that was put out – you name it, we were on it.' Nevertheless Berry Gordy had not forgotten the Tops, and they were chosen to work with the producer-songwriting team of Eddie and Brian Holland and Lamont Dozier, a relationship that Payton later described as 'the perfect marriage'.

Lamont Dozier had been a friend of the group from early days and his knowledge of the Tops' vocal abilities was a major factor in the choice of 'Baby I Need Your Loving' as their Motown label debut. The song set the pattern for so many subsequent smashes: a harmonised intro followed by Levi Stubbs' pleading tones, the harmonies chiming in again on the chorus with renewed effect. Released in the summer of 1964, 'Baby I Need Your Loving' peaked at Number 11 in *Billboard*'s Hot Hundred; it was their first hit.

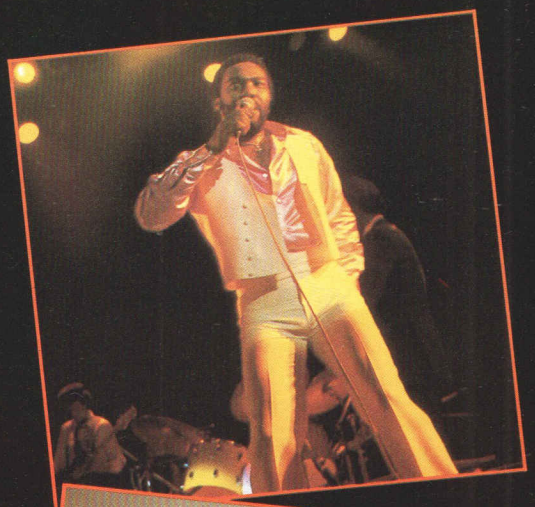
Holland, Dozier and Holland had other commitments within the Motown organisation, notably with the Supremes, but they managed to produce three more records for the Four Tops in the next nine months. It was the third of these, 'I Can't Help Myself', which hit the top in mid 1965. Curiously, its mid-paced tempo, tambourines and lush orchestration was reminiscent in many ways of the Supremes, whose position as Motown's hottest act was then under threat. Unlike their rivals, however, the Tops made only occasional appearances in the UK charts: 'Baby I Need Your Loving' had lost out to a typical Merseybeat cover by the Fourmost and subsequent releases had also failed.

Stateside success continued unabated, however. 'It's The Same Old Song' hit Number 5 and 'Ain't That Love', a genuine Four Tops oldie and one of Columbia's previously unsuccessful releases, entered the Hot Hundred, if only for a solitary week. From then on, the chart entries became as predictable as the sounds were rewarding. Even the group's lesser hits, like Stevie Wonder's 'Loving



The Four Tops in the Eighties – reaching out to success (below), a few years and several hits further on from their 1968 publicity shot (inset right). Insets far right: Levi Stubbs, lead singer with the Tops, woos the audience (above) while the group congregate around Brian Epstein (below).

ch Out!



You Is Sweeter Than Ever', were subsequently covered by artists from Alan Price to Elton John. But the UK breakthrough was not to come until late 1966, with what was possibly the Tops' – and Holland-Dozier-Holland's – finest record.

From the haunting flute-and-oboe intro over an insistent drumbeat through the tambourine-laden verse to the chorus harmonies, 'Reach Out I'll Be There' had class stamped right through it. It was a deserved Number 1 on both sides of the Atlantic and established Levi Stubbs as 'the voice of Motown' for UK fans. From that point onwards, the Four Tops' releases rarely failed to make the UK Top Twenty, and the group began a rewarding relationship with British audiences, touring regularly.

Recipe for success

The Four Tops and their producers had found a winning formula. Take a mid to uptempo backing track of typical Motown style, let the instrumentation fall away to highlight the emotive, desperate tones of Levi Stubbs tackling a lyric of heartbreak and desertion – then the hook, a tidal wave of sound, would engulf the listener with harmony as the backing continued relentlessly. A trio of splendid hits in 1967 – 'Standing In The Shadows Of Love', 'Bernadette', and 'Seven Rooms Of Gloom' – continued the Tops' Top Twenty touch, although 'Bernadette', a hymn of devotion with an epic Motown bass-line, departed from the group's usual type of lyric.

As one of the first internationally-famous Motown acts, the Tops had the chance to test out their stage act in front of many different audiences. Not that it was to change much over the years. As the backing band brought their instrumental warm-up to a close, the group (in matching suits) would bound up to the mike and hit the opening note as one. The first signs of sweat would see jackets discarded: Stubbs might remove his mike from its stand and move into a ballad, ad-libbing soulfully as Obie, Duke and Lawrence crooned stage right. Then – bang! uptempo again with the twinkling feet and sure routines born of countless club and cabaret dates. Like each of their songs, the Tops would build their act to a series of crescendos before quitting the stage with much hand-shaking and smiles.

Despite the group's consistency in the charts, later Holland-Dozier-Holland productions occasionally varied the ingredients of the hit recipe, but only by a little at a time. 'If I Were A Carpenter', a UK Number 7 and US Number 20 in early 1968, combined a contemporary folk-pop number (written by Tim Hardin) with a harpsichord-style backing, but the vocal quartet put the Four Tops' stamp on an

Right and below: The Four Tops conjure up their magical vocal harmonies. The group's line-up was (below from left): Obie Benson, Abdul Fakir, Lawrence Payton and Levi Stubbs.

ambitiously 'clean' sound. Albums came at the rate of two a year, but were for dedicated fans only, the obligatory brace of hit singles being accompanied by such unashamed fillers as the Monkees' 'Last Train To Clarksville'.

The departure from Motown of the Holland-Dozier-Holland team in 1968 was traumatic for the label as a whole; but the Four Tops eventually found an able replacement producer in Motown stalwart Frank Wilson, although the days of innovation were over. Unlike label-mates and contemporaries the Temptations, the Tops steered clear of psychedelia and social comment, restricting themselves to the emotion-filled numbers in which Stubbs' voice excelled. By the turn of the decade, however, the importance to the group of their former producers was evident from the Tops' decline to the lower reaches of the US Hot Hundred, although British fans remained comparatively loyal. Their recipe for success turned into a straitjacket.

Change in direction

The time was ripe for experiment, and one of the more interesting options taken up was a recording made with the Moody Blues in the early Seventies. The Tops had just come offstage after a one-nighter on a British tour when they were approached by Moodies' producer Tony Clarke with a demo of Mike Pinder's 'Simple Game' in hand. As Lawrence Payton remembers it, 'We didn't even know who he was. . . . We thought it was a good song, so the next day we went in, rehearsed and recorded it.' With the Moody Blues uncredited among the backing musicians and Payton sharing lead with Stubbs, the record was released in 1971 and made the UK Number 3 position. It was not merely nostalgic reasons that placed it at the end of the Four Tops' set on their 1982 UK tour a decade later.

The Tops rang the changes in the production sphere, too, with Ivy Hunter, Johnny Bristol and Smokey Robinson among those recruited – with varying success. It was widely felt that the group had passed their peak. Certainly, collaboration with the Diana-less Supremes yielded only insipid fare. An album released in 1972 showed both groups wearing cowboy gear and uncomfortable expressions on the cover; the record itself was hardly aural *Dynamite*, either.

The departure of the Four Tops from Motown shortly afterwards coincided with the company's move from Detroit to the West Coast. The label had embraced new sounds but the Tops had remained the same – and Motown no longer saw the group as a long-term money-spinner.

A parting of the ways was inevitable, but the choice of new label was surprising: Dunhill Records had made most of its money of out Sixties folk. The combination of the Tops and producers Brian Potter and Dennis Lambert achieved initial success with 'Keeper Of The Castle' – the title track of a popular album – and 'Ain't No Woman (Like The One I Got)', the only song of this period featured live in the Eighties; but this burst of popularity soon faded. The production team's subsequent success with Tavares in a similar field suggests that the group was unable to get out of the rut, but such projects as the soundtrack to *Shaft In Africa* (1974) seemed wholly ill-advised.

The group had clocked up nearly a quarter-century in the business, and the gruelling round of touring and recording was one from which they wanted to escape for domestic and professional reasons. Writers Obie Benson and Lawrence Payton took time out to write for Marvin Gaye and Aretha Franklin respectively; Benson co-wrote the influential 'What's Going On'. Live appearances, when they happened, tended to be cabaret seasons rather than the one-nighters that had formed the schedule in the Fifties and Sixties. It wasn't so much a case of selling out as going back to their roots in the Detroit days, even if it meant reliving former glories night after night.

During their exile from the charts, the Four Tops had watched and listened to the groups who were changing the face of black music. When they signed with Casablanca Records in 1980 it seemed as if they might have tied themselves to the disco bandwagon with a label best-known for promoting such acts as Donna Summer and Lipps Inc. But the Tops were taking positive steps to put the hitless years behind them. 'With disco, we found ourselves a little disoriented,' recalled Payton, 'but Casablanca wanted to go with a different thing.' The label paired them with producer David Wolfert and provided a nucleus of musicians previously known as sidemen for West Coast 'white-soul' artists. Accepting that they were no longer dictators of style, the Tops decided on a more sophisticated feel.

Released in late 1981, 'When She Was My Girl' deserved its success in the UK and US charts. Obie Benson's acappella bass was especially attractive and the use of a melodica as solo instrument was both unusual and effective. The follow-up, 'Don't Walk Away', boasted a 'popping' octave bass-line worthy of Earth, Wind and Fire, while the album *Tonight* (1982) bore witness to the fact that, whatever the musical changes, the Tops were still in fine and distinctive vocal form. And during their 27-date tour of the UK in 1982 the group showed a renewed relish for live performance. The sound they produced was undeniably of the Sixties, yet it continues to exert a strong appeal despite the many vagaries of fashion.

MICHAEL HEATLEY

Four Tops
Recommended Listening

The Best Of The Four Tops (K-Tel NE 1160) (Includes: Reach Out I'll Be There, Walk Away Renee, Standing In The Shadows Of Love, Seven Rooms Of Gloom, If I Were A Carpenter, Bernadette, You Keep Running Away). *Greatest Hits 1972–1976* (MCA MCL 1675) (Includes: Ain't No Woman, Are You Man Enough, Catfish, One Chain Don't Make A Prison, Keeper Of The Castle, Sweet Understanding Love). *Tonight* (Phonogram 6480 058) (Includes: When She Was My Girl, From A Distance, Tonight I'm Gonna Love You All Over, Don't Walk Away).

The Four Tops relax, away from the tension and glitter of the stage.

HITSVILLE USA

How Tamla mass-produced its chart entries

THE EARLY RECORDINGS on the Motown and Tamla labels lacked a distinctive unifying sound other than that of contemporary rhythm and blues, but as the market indicated its preference for certain types of Motown product, the company's core of songwriters and producers gained more self-confidence in their own personal sound and a house-style began to emerge. By 1962 those artists whose potential was proven, or was considered promising, started to receive the most attention while acts of questionable commercial viability were eased out. And around such talents as the Miracles, Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye, the Marvelettes, Little Stevie Wonder, the Temptations and the Supremes, Berry Gordy's creative team forged the unique Motown sound. The principal members of that team were Lamont Dozier and the Holland brothers, Brian and Eddie, who together were responsible for writing and producing a vast proportion of Motown's output in the Sixties.

Eddie Holland had been born in Detroit on 30 October 1939. Having dropped out of college in the late Fifties, he went to work for Berry Gordy, singing demo discs of Gordy's songs for Jackie Wilson. A couple of Holland masters leased to United Artists in 1959 and 1960 went nowhere, but a year later he cut 'Jamie' for Motown itself and this reached Number 30 in the pop charts in January 1962.

The record was highly derivative of both Jackie Wilson's style and of the uptown R&B popularised by the Drifters but, significantly, it was the company's first product to feature the strings of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (arranged by Gordy's second wife, Raynoma) which subsequently became a hallmark of the Motown sound. Later Holland sides were derivative too; these included 'If Cleopatra Took A Chance', which owed much to Smokey Robinson's productions for Mary Wells, and 'Baby Shake', which borrowed from Jackie Wilson's 'Baby Workout'.

When the Supremes (opposite) teamed up with writer-producers Lamont Dozier and Brian and Eddie Holland (below), Motown struck gold, for it proved to be a hugely successful alliance.

By 1963, however, Holland was blueprinting the beginnings of a distinctive aural identity for himself and other artists, the result of a new and permanent songwriting and production partnership with his brother Brian and Lamont Dozier (born 16 June 1941 in Detroit). The elements of the sound they made their own were a bedrock bass-line; an emphatic beat accentuated by tambourines; pounding percussion and piano tracks; growling saxes; shrill female backup vocals in the classic call-and-response mode of gospel performances; and the swirling, riff-reinforcing strings of the Detroit Symphony.

During 1963, the new team worked with a number of Motown acts, including the Marvelettes ('Locking Up My Heart'), the Miracles ('Mickey's Monkey' and 'I Gotta Dance To Keep From Crying'), Martha and the Vandellas ('Come And Get These Memories' and 'Heat Wave'), Marvin Gaye ('Can I Get A Witness'), Mary Wells ('You Lost The Sweetest Boy') and the Supremes ('When The Lovelight Starts Shining Through His Eyes'). The records were far from identical – for one thing, the mix of the instrumental and vocal tracks varied – but they featured most elements, if not all, of the emerging sound and each one deservedly became a hit for Motown.

Eddie Holland's own recording of 'Leaving Here', a minor hit in 1964, also featured the basic blueprint, while his 'Candy To Me', issued several months later, was the improved model. All the previously-noted components were in place, and the infectious beat was emphasised by heavy handclaps and echo. The use of vibraphones added an arresting treble tone.

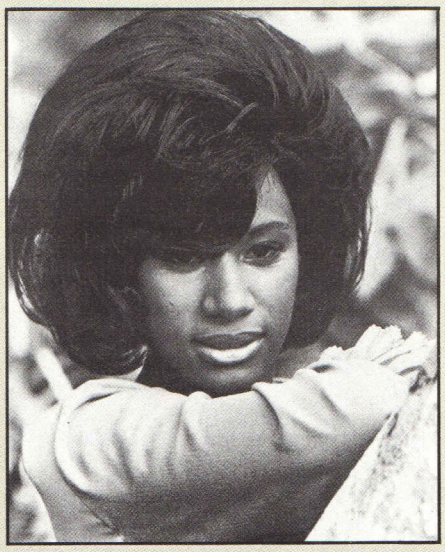
Supreme sandwich

The consummate exponents of Holland, Dozier and Holland's burgeoning creativity were the Supremes, for whom the team wrote and produced five consecutive Number 1 hits between July 1964 and the following May. The Supremes' first *Billboard* Number 1 came with 'Where Did Our Love Go', on which the song's melancholy was accentuated by a persistent piano motif; but as the sequence of hits continued, Holland, Dozier and Holland crafted a fuller, more metallic sound. (Singer Mary Wilson was unimpressed with the first draft of 'Where Did Our Love Go', and urged its creators to come up with less juvenile material.) Their habit of recording Diana Ross quickly on new material, before familiarity with a song smoothed out her vocal's rough edges, paid off time and time again, from the early successes right through to 'You Can't Hurry Love' and 'You Keep Me Hangin' On', a Number 1 hit towards the end of 1966.

The haste of the Supremes' recording sessions contrasts with the Holland-Dozier-Holland approach to the Four Tops, as group singer Levi Stubbs

Brenda Holloway

A sensuous voice and sultry good looks helped Brenda Holloway become one of Motown's top girls. Above: Relaxing with friends. Below: Pensive publicity.



BRENDA HOLLOWAY was born on 21 June 1946 in the small town of Atascadero, California, but by her teens was living in the ghetto district of Watts in Los Angeles and dreaming of showbusiness. Desperate for stardom, Brenda resorted to gatecrashing a convention in Los Angeles where she attracted the attention of Berry Gordy by singing along to the records of Mary Wells. A combination of vocal ability and svelte good looks secured her entry into Motown and she found herself commuting between Los Angeles and Detroit from 1962 onwards.

Her career on Tamla blossomed when she cut the anguished soul ballad 'Every Little Bit Hurts', which sold nearly a million copies and reached Number 13 in the Hot Hundred during May 1964. Slow and dramatic, ebbing and flowing with passion, it showcased her sinuous voice climbing over silky strings and the prominent piano of Lincoln Mayorga and was the first West Coast production to provide a sizeable hit for Motown. The song became a standard and was recorded by a wide range of singers including Stevie Winwood of the Spencer Davis Group (1965) and Southern songstress Peggy Scott (1970).

Equally intense symphonic soul followed with 'I'll Always Love You' (1964) before Brenda changed direction on the Smokey Robinson composition 'When I'm Gone', which reached Number 25 in April 1965. Here she employed the lighter phrasing of Mary Wells, who had originally recorded the song.

At this point Brenda Holloway, who possessed one of the richest voices in black music, was poised to become one of Detroit's leading singers. A run of highly attractive singles including 'Operator', 'Together Till The End Of Time', 'Hurt A Little Every Day' and 'Just Look What You've Done' culminated with her composition 'You've Made Me So Very Happy', released in late 1967. She envisaged this as a piece of vibrant psychedelia but was overruled by Berry Gordy, who insisted on a more seductive approach. Blood Sweat and Tears realised her true intentions and their rock version reached Number 2 in *Billboard*'s Hot Hundred in April 1969, selling two million copies.

By the late Sixties Brenda had become disillusioned with compromise, sharp practice and flesh peddling in the music business. She devoted herself instead to her family and her church. Later she charged Motown with falsely and fraudulently understating her royalties and won her case in 1972. During the Seventies she was involved in session work for a variety of artists including the San Remo Strings and Joe Cocker. Despite an attempt to revive her career on the Groove Merchant label in 1972, Brenda Holloway has since remained out of the public eye.

CLIVE ANDERSON

recalled: 'We'd sit around and talk, and maybe sing a line at a time, and try to get a feeling for the tune; send out and get a sandwich or a cold beer, wait an hour 'til the sandwich settled, then we'd take another shot at it.'

Those remarks reach to the heart of Motown's creative process, and to the reasons for its success. Not only did the company have its own crew of songwriters and producers – it also had its own studio, operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Levi Stubbs remembered recording 'Baby I Need Your Loving' between two and eight o'clock in the morning, after Brian Holland told him about the song between drinks at the Twenty Grand night-club in Detroit.

In-house heroes

There were also in-house arrangers (among them, Maurice King, Hank Cosby, Ivy Hunter and Clarence Paul) and in-house engineers (headed by Michael McLain, who built and maintained much of the company's early recording equipment). There were in-house session singers (the Andantes and the Love-Tones) and, of course, there were the in-house musicians, the pulse of the Motown sound, its unsung heroes.

Leader of the house band was Earl Van Dyke, whose swirling organ underpinned hundreds of hits. Among his crew were guitarist Robert White, whose metallic, clanking sound encouraged the description of Motown records as production line pieces, factory noise set to music, and drummers Uriel Jones and Benny Benjamin, who provided the compulsive momentum of Holland, Dozier and Hol-

Right: Earl Van Dyke (front) and his quartet. Van Dyke led the Motown house band in the Sixties. Below: Images of Motown magic, artists of renown.

land's best work, especially the rattling snares and distinctive tom-tom fills. James Jamerson's bass-lines anchored each rhythm track, lending depth and counterpointing the treble boost favoured by Gordy, while James Gitton's vibes contributed to that treble mix with a ringing tone which also offset the percussive effect of tambourines. The final ingredient was supplied by Eddie (Bongo) Brown, whose conga work was especially important to the productions of Smokey Robinson and Norman Whitfield, lending them a fluid and supple quality which Holland, Dozier and Holland generally eschewed.

This rhythm section, augmented by dozens of other sidemen, was utilised in the studio in different ways. Some dates were recorded live, others with overdubs. Many backing tracks were not recorded in Detroit at all but were built on the foundations laid by Hollywood bass-player Carol Kaye and drummer Earl Palmer. These included the Supremes'

Martha and the Vandellas

MARTHA REEVES was born on 18 July 1941 in Alabama, one of a family of 11 children raised as Methodists. She moved north to Detroit as a teenager and soon found favour singing classical repertoire on radio. Later she worked clubs in Toledo as Martha LaVelle, soul singer, and formed the Delphis with Rosalind Ashford and Annette Sterling. The group recorded for Checkmate without success, disbanded and then joined Motown, where Martha doubled as secretary and demo singer. With Rosalind and Annette she supported Marvin Gaye on 'Stubborn Kind Of Fellow' (1961) with such verve that they stole his thunder and, in the opinion of some, 'vandalised' his disc. As a result they were dubbed Martha and the Vandellas and signed to the Gordy label.

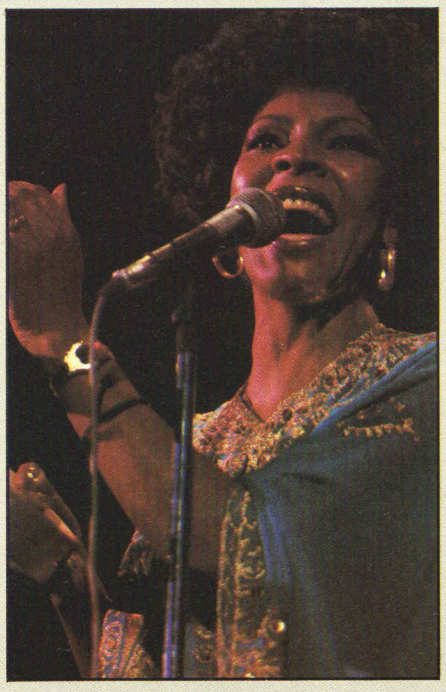
They made an auspicious debut in September 1962 with 'I'll Have To Let Him Go' and enjoyed success in the R&B listings with their second outing 'Come And Get These Memories' in April 1963. Their third disc, the Holland-Dozier-Holland composition 'Heat Wave', coupled with the mellifluous 'A Love Like Yours', peaked at Number 4 nationally in the summer of 1963, selling a million copies in the process. This release demonstrated Martha's ability to switch from hard-edged R&B to sultry soul ballads. 'Quicksand', issued in November, evinced exactly the same qualities as 'Heat Wave' and reached Number 8 in the Hot Hundred.

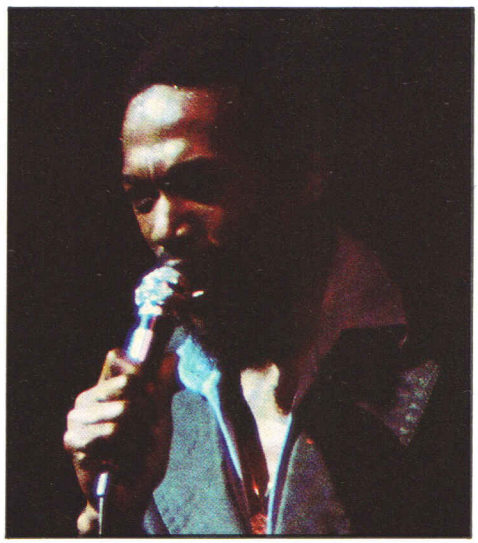
Annette departed in 1964 and was replaced by Betty Kelly. In August 1964 the Vandellas notched their second million-seller, the infectious 'Dancing In The Street', written by Marvin Gaye and William Stevenson; according to Martha it was conceived as an antidote to the inner city violence of the long hot summers. They were riding high and the hits followed fast, including 'Nowhere To Run' (1965), 'My Baby Loves Me' and 'I'm Ready For Love' (both 1966), 'Jimmy Mack' – a Hot Hundred Number 10 – and 'Love Bug Leave My Heart Alone' (both 1967). By November 1967 when they secured their final national hit, 'Honey Chile', they were billed as Martha Reeves and the Vandellas.

In 1968 Betty Kelly was replaced by Martha's younger sister, Lois Reeves from the Orlons, and the next year Rosalind Ashford gave way to Sandra Tilley of the Velvelettes. But despite attractive items like 'Honey Love' (1969) and 'In And Out Of My Life' (1971) the Vandellas were fading. Martha suffered a breakdown and by 1973 the group were finished. Lois joined Quiet Elegance on the Hi label and Martha went solo with MCA, where she worked on the *Willie Dynamite* soundtrack with J. J. Johnson, did session singing behind Ringo Starr, and recorded a peerless rock-soul set in *Martha Reeves* (1974).

Commercial success eluded her and so she moved to Arista, but neither her singles nor the album *The Rest Of My Life* (1976) made much impression. She later appeared as a TV actress but by the Eighties her career was in the doldrums. CLIVE ANDERSON

Martha Reeves (below left) and with the Vandellas (below).





Above left: Kim Weston and husband Mickey Stevenson, one of Motown's top producers. Above centre: Eddie Kendricks of the Temptations. Above right: Clarence Paul, singer and house arranger. Below: Producer Norman Whitfield (left), Barrett Strong (right) and backing singers. Whitfield was creator of the Temptations' sound.

'Back In My Arms', Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell's 'If I Could Build My Whole World Around You' and Stevie Wonder's 'I Was Made To Love Her'.

Since Motown's producers were also songwriters, they would frequently work first with the instrumental tracks, then the melody line, the lyric and the vocals. This process would often stimulate the artists, as Levi Stubbs pointed out: 'There would be an interaction with the songwriters. They would let you know what they were thinking about when they wrote the lyric and what mood they would like to create.' Then, he said, the Four Tops would offer their own interpretation based on that outline.

The Gordy approach

This informal and unstructured approach derived largely from Berry Gordy's own philosophy. 'I just always thought that there were no rules,' he told a journalist on the occasion of Motown's 20th anniversary. 'If it sounded good, I thought it *was* good.' Another factor was the much-vaunted family atmosphere which prevailed within West Grand Boulevard during the early years.

Equally important to Gordy's philosophy was competition. Producers and songwriters vied with each other constantly for the right to record hot acts. Being responsible for one success didn't automatically entitle them to the follow-up, although Holland, Dozier and Holland's franchise on the singles of the Supremes and the Four Tops was virtually exclusive between 1964 and 1967. Then there was quality control. The perpetual perfectionist, Gordy established this department under the auspices of Billie Jean Brown to screen every piece of product prior to release. For a long time, the Motown chief himself was the department, the final arbiter. He listened to everything, and was quick to send a recording back to its producer for remastering, remixing or more drastic surgery if it fell short of his expectations.

In fact, remixing was a constant occurrence, sometimes even after a record was released. Gordy knew that Motown's success depended on extensive radio exposure, particularly for the pop market, and producers were told to keep that in mind. No matter how impressive a record was when booming through large studio monitors, would it sound so good on the four-inch speakers of a car radio? Consequently, the company's singles were often mixed on small speakers atop the recording console, punching up the treble effect and utilising equalisation so that one or two instruments – the tight snare drum of Martha and the Vandellas' 'Nowhere To Run', for example, or the pounding bassline of the Supremes' 'You Can't Hurry Love' – jumped out of the AM airwaves within a record's first few seconds.

Uptight and husky

Another member of Gordy's creative team who contributed much to the development of the Motown sound was Norman Whitfield. He was first noticeable at Motown as author of a couple of early Temptations songs, and producer of Martha and the Vandellas' 'I'll Have To Let Him Go', but his 1964 work on the Velvelettes' 'Needle In A Haystack' and 'He Was Really Sayin' Something' demonstrated more dexterity with the Detroit sound.

In 1964, Whitfield accrued two Top Thirty hits – the Marvelettes' 'Too Many

Fish In The Sea' and the Temptations' 'Girl (Why You Wanna Make Me Blue)' – and, by mid 1966, he was the main man behind the Temptations, masterminding a tough and tense texture on their records in place of Smokey Robinson's alternately melancholy ('My Girl', 'Since I Lost My Baby') or exuberant ('My Baby', 'Get Ready') approach. In particular, the producer exploited David Ruffin's husky baritone and Eddie Kendricks' gossamer falsetto to good effect.

A further key exponent of Motown's mid-Sixties' sound was Mickey Stevenson. His work boasted no single identifying characteristic, but rather an endearing versatility. In 1963 and 1964 he handled Marvin Gaye ('Stubborn Kind Of Fellow', 'Hitch Hike', 'Pride And Joy') and the Marvelettes ('Beechwood 4-5789'). Then, as the Motown sound kicked into high gear, he proved equally comfortable producing numbers with a cutting edge (Martha and the Vandellas' 'Dancing In The Street', Junior Walker and the All Stars' 'Do The Boomerang', Stevie Wonder's 'Uptight') and ones with more orchestral leanings (Jimmy Ruffin's 'What Becomes Of The Brokenhearted', Martha and the Vandellas' 'My Baby Loves Me').

Stevenson was also notable for his productions with Kim Weston, among them 'Love Me All The Way', 'Just Loving You' and 'A Little More Love'. He also produced a couple of successful duets featuring Weston and Marvin Gaye, which neatly show the evolution of the Motown sound between 1964 and 1966. The first, 'What Good Am I Without You', is an infectious, midtempo outing, powered by percussion and bluesy piano work, in which Weston and Gaye trade lines. The second, 'It Takes Two', is an uptempo opus, with tambourines rather than handclaps emphasising the beat, and strings swirling around the couple's harmony vocals.

Mickey Stevenson shared his status as one of Motown's important second division producer-songwriters with a number of others: Hal Davis, Clarence Paul, Hank Cosby, Harvey Fuqua and Johnny Bristol. Davis and partner Marc Gordon, based in the company's Los Angeles office, were best known for their work with Brenda Holloway; Paul and Cosby worked mostly with Little Stevie Wonder (and were instrumental in harnessing and directing the youngster's extraordinary talents); and Fuqua and Bristol began collecting Motown credits in 1966 with Junior Walker and the All Stars, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell.

Rats, roaches and talent

With so many producers, so many artists, it's little wonder that Motown's studio at 2648 West Grand Boulevard was in use all day, every day. Yet though record sales grew apace, the release rate of titles did not. In 1964, for example, the three

The Marvelettes

ORIGINALLY the Marvelettes comprised Gladys Horton, Georgeanna Tillman, Katherine Anderson, Wanda Young and Juanita Cowart. All were born in Detroit in 1944. They were signed by Berry Gordy after winning a talent show at Inkster High School, where they were still in their senior year. Their first release on Tamla, 'Please Mr Postman', topped the national charts in the autumn of 1961 and went gold. A tour ensued and they became the first successful female group with Motown, paving the way for the Vandellas and the Supremes and doing much to establish the company.

Lead singer Gladys Horton possessed a distinctive, faintly adenoidal voice and the entire group exuded a fetching toughness. Along with Martha and the Vandellas they provided a welcome antidote to some of the more syrupy Motown effusions, especially after 1964 when the Supremes sighed their way to prominence. 'Please Mr Postman' inspired Dee Dee Sharp's 1962 smash hit 'Mashed Potato Time' and was successfully reworked by the Beatles in 1963 and the Carpenters in 1974. Especially effective was the 'Whoa yeah!' punctuation from the girls in unison, and most Marvelettes' sides benefited from such small touches. 'Playboy' (Number 7) was virtually a re-run of 'Postman' but the piano made a difference and there was a storming vocal finish. 'Beechwood 4-5789' (a US national Top Ten hit) had the girls rocking out their telephone number in a most seductive fashion in 1962 while 'Too Many Fish In The Sea', a Number 25 hit in late 1964, was lyrically neat and featured greasy sax embellishments.

The Marvelettes' material was supplied by such fine writers as Brian and Eddie Holland, Lamont Dozier, Norman Whitfield, Marvin Gaye, William Stevenson and Ivy Hunter, but some of their biggest successes came from the pen of Smokey Robinson. Prime examples include the superb admonition 'Don't Mess With Bill' (Number 7 in 1966), replete with rooting tenor sax, and 'The Hunter Gets Captured By The Game' (Number 13 in 1967). The latter song was covered in the Eighties by both Grace Jones and Blondie.

The line-up of the group changed frequently after 1963 when Juanita Cowart left. Georgeanna Tillman went next but the major blow came in 1968 with the departure of Gladys Horton. Ann Bogan (from the Andantes) was a competent replacement but times had changed and the hits were becoming more elusive. Only 'A Breathtaking Guy' (1970), another Smokey Robinson number, suggested their former glories. The Marvelettes broke up soon afterwards, but a re-formed line-up appeared in 1980. Both the group's past recordings and more recent interpretations of their material suggest that their legacy is far from exhausted.

CLIVE ANDERSON

The Marvelettes in the Sixties, when their career was at its peak.

primary labels (Tamla, Motown, Gordy) and two secondary outlets (Soul, VIP) put a total of 65 singles into national circulation. In 1966, the year of 'You Can't Hurry Love', 'Reach Out I'll Be There' and 15 other major hits, the company issued a mere 55.

The volume of singles released doesn't necessarily provide an accurate fix on the amount of recording done – Motown was issuing more albums in 1966 than in 1964 – but it does suggest basic stability. The company maintained its quality control procedures, too, although the old practice of inviting people off the street to hear and comment on new releases was phased out when certain producers began to deliver hits with unerring consistency.

But perhaps the moment when Berry Gordy finally felt he had achieved his goal of international recognition and acceptance for Motown's music and artists came in 1966 when, rather self-importantly, the company began to call itself 'The Sound of Young America'.

As a public relations exercise, this was undeniably more marketable – though considerably less convincing – than the phrase used by Gordy himself to describe his company's birth. The roots of Motown, he observed, were 'rats, roaches, talent, guts and love'. Nobody said it better.

ADAM WHITE

Left: Johnny Bristol started Junior Walker on his recording career and, as writer and producer, guided his recorded output. Below: Former premises of the Motown organisation in downtown Detroit.

THE HISTORY OF ROCK

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